

ORGANIC FARMING IN WALLONIA : SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. The paper describes the recent evolution of organic farming in Wallonia. The share of organic farmers in the total number of farms in Wallonia now reaches 5%, which is also the proportion of organic agricultural land in the total agricultural area. The financial support of public authorities, through direct payments or services like research, extension, advertisement, is essential for the maintenance or development of the Wallonian organic sector. This support is not granted for the future, but can be expected.

Key words: organic, agriculture, environment, production, market.

1. Introduction

With the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy within the European Union and the technical progress in the practice of agriculture in general, overproduction became, for the first time in human history, a problem for some products. On another side, the large use of fertilizers and pesticides led to negative environmental consequences. In such a situation, organic farming can be a solution both from an economical and an environmental point of view, at least for some farms. It is also the case in Belgium, where agriculture is very intensive, and its Southern region, Wallonia (agricultural matters are largely regionalized in Belgium).

So, this paper describes the recent evolution of organic farming in Wallonia.

2. Origin and definition of organic farming in Wallonia

At the beginning, organic farming was a non-economical choice, it was rather a philosophy and linked to a way of life. To practice organic farming is due to the decision to produce and to consume agricultural goods while respecting the land, by using no

pesticides and no chemical fertilizers, which has a positive impact on the environment.

The production guidelines are :

- the respect of the land;
- the land feeds the plants;
- the plants feed the animals;
- farmers are self-sufficient concerning fertilizers and animal feed;
- links are established between producers and consumers.

In opposition to the classical way of production, the specifications of organic products and production methods are agreed upon between farmers and consumers since the beginning.

3. Evolution of organic farming importance

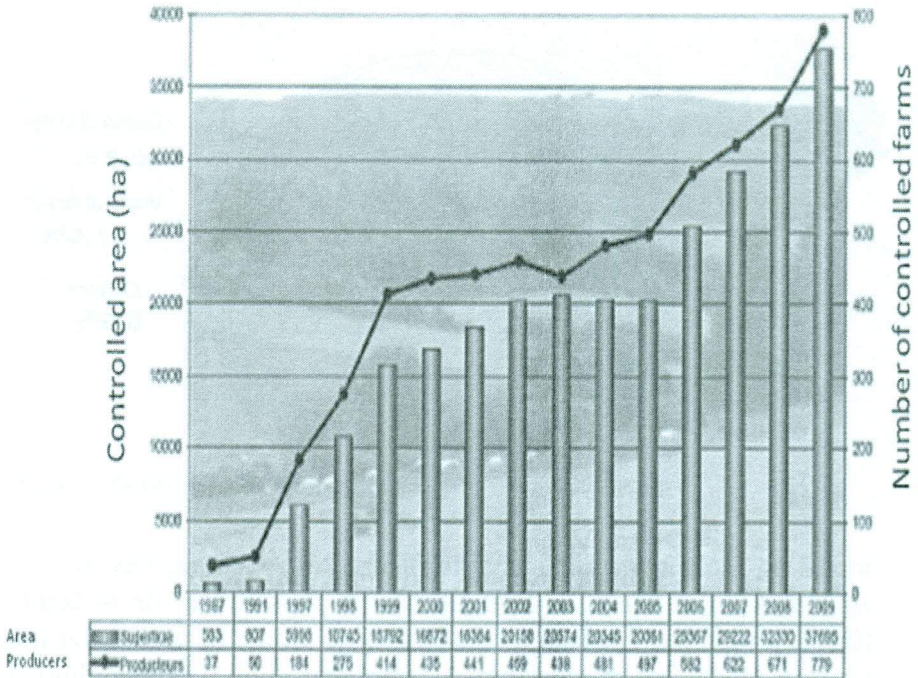
In the eighties, organic farming was still not significant, with only 37 farms and 500 hectares in 1987 (before the official recognition of organic farming by the European Commission in 1991). However, the importance of organic farming sharply increased in the nineties. In 2000, more than 400 farmers were practicing organic farming, the concerned area being higher than 16,000 ha (figure 1).

The importance of organic farming was stable between 2002 and 2005, but since 2006 it sharply increased again and in 2009, 779 farmers were involved in organic farming, managing more than 37,000 ha.

The share of organic farmers in the total number of farms in Wallonia now reaches 5%, which is also the proportion of organic agricultural land in the total agricultural area.

Figure no. 1

Evolution of organic farming in Wallonia



Source : SPW • DQARNE
Direction de la Qualité

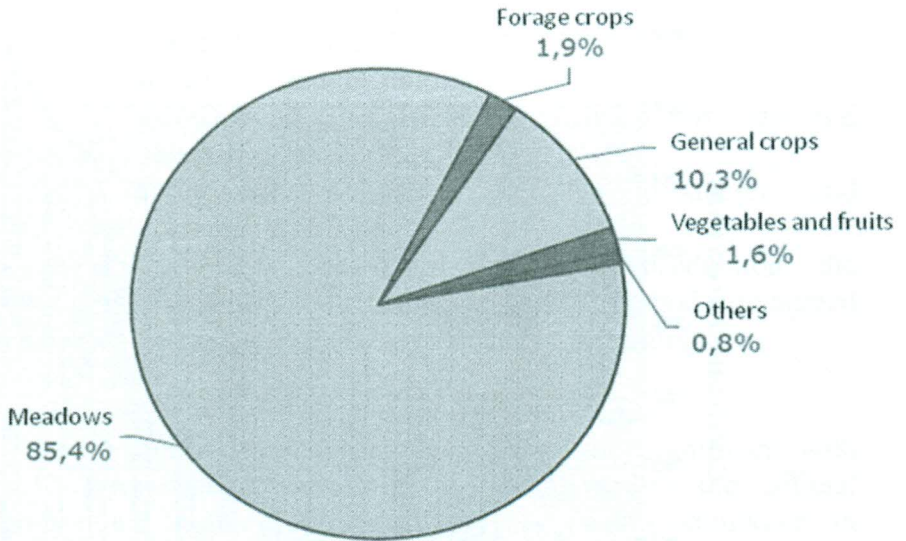
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4. Area devoted to organic farming

By far, the largest area concerned with organic farming is devoted to meadows (85%). They are situated in pedoclimatical regions which are not suitable for arable crops and where bovine meat and milk are nearly the lonely possible productions, based on grass. So, in these areas, it can be assumed that organic farming has always been practiced and there was no conversion from classic agriculture, the old practice being simply labelled "organic farming". General crops, mainly cereals, represent 10% of the organic area. Forage crops contribute for less than 2%. Horticultural organic products are not well developed in Wallonia : vegetables and fruits represent only 1.6% of the area devoted to organic farming (figure 2).

Figure no. 2

Area devoted to organic farming in Wallonia (2008)



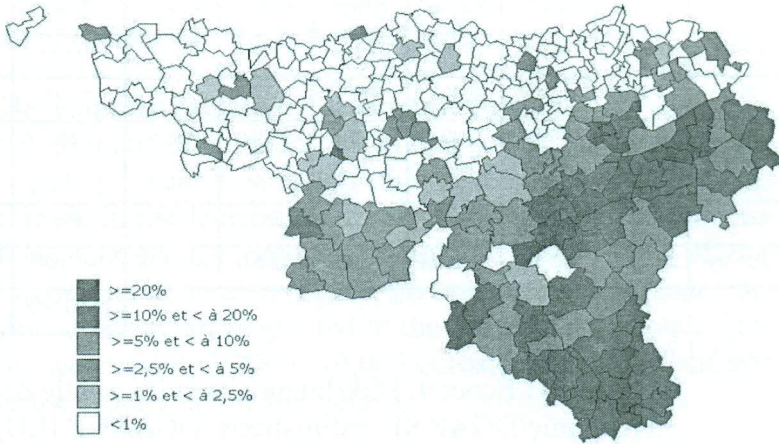
Source : Région wallonne, DGARNE

5. Location of organic farming

Organic farming in Wallonia is mainly concentrated in the South-Eastern region, approximatively corresponding to the less favoured area. The altitude in this region is the highest in Wallonia (up to 600 m), soils are acid and of lower quality, the climate is more humid and colder. In some communes, the area devoted to organic farming is relatively large, representing more than 20% of the total agricultural area (map 1).

Map no. 1

Percentage of organic area in the agricultural area of the communes



Sources : Service public de Wallonie/DGARNE , SPF économie/DGSIE

On the opposite, organic farming is very marginal or is not practiced at all in this area, where the best soils are cultivated. This region is devoted to arable crops (wheat, sugarbeet, potato, rapeseed) with high yields (yields reaching 10 tons per ha of wheat are not unusual).

6. Animal Production

In 2008, the number of cattle heads reached more than 40,000 (table 1), which is a one-third increase compared to 2006, but only 1,000 heads more than 2002. It is around 3% of the Wallonian herd.

The number of pigs is increasing and approaching 10,000 heads, more than twice as much as in 2002. A remarkable increase is observed in the field of poultry production, with nearly one million heads in 2008, against less than 300,000 heads in 2002. This is due to the involvement of a Dutch company which proposes contracts to Wallonian farmers for the production of organic poultry. Sheep and goats are also present, but their number is rather stable.

Table no. 1**Animal production in organic farming in Wallonia (2002-2008)**

Species	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008		
	Heads	Heads	Heads	Heads	Heads	Heads	Heads	LU	% LU
Cattle	39 476	30 270	29 530	31 144	30 844	36 275	40 467	32 804	80,6
Pigs	4 213	5 056	6 407	6 939	9 377	9 438	9 593	1 543	3,8
Sheep and goats	6 437	5 964	7 221	8 350	9 192	8 929	7 652	1 148	2,8
Others	295	130	496	732	653	714	881	623	1,5
Poultry	286 497	502 510	628 314	672 306	772 636	853 124	945 000	4 587	11,3
							1 003 953	40 705	100,0

LU = Livestock Unit

Source : Ecocert, Blik/Integra, Service public de Wallonie/DGARNE, estimations DGARNE (LU)

7. The market of organic food products in Belgium

Organic products are well known by the Belgian consumers. However, the share of organic products in the Belgian food market is still marginal: around 1.3% only. Even if the quantities consumed are not very large, Belgium does not produce enough to satisfy its domestic consumption and the trade balance is negative.

Within the organic food market, the situation is different according to the products. The Belgian Ministry of Economic Affairs regularly surveys a sample of Belgian households representative of the Belgian population. For each food product, the percentage of purchasing households is recorded. Recently, organic products were distinguished in the survey. According to the results, the share of purchasing households reaches 10% for organic eggs, 6% for organic milk and dairy products, 4% for bread and cereals, 0.5% only for meat and fish. Of course, many households buy both organic and conventional products and the figures abovementioned do not mean that organic eggs represent 10% of the market.

8. Retailing of organic products

As for conventional products, organic products in Belgium are mainly bought and sold in supermarkets, which have understood that organic products could be interesting from a marketing point of view. Shops specialized in organic products arrive in the second position. Other ways of retailing are much less important, though quantities using these channels are increasing :

- direct sales on farms;
- sales on local weekly markets;
- sales through cooperative shops;
- direct sales through supermarkets (franchising);
- sales through consumers' associations.

9. Development strategy for organic farming

The Wallonian government, which is in charge of the regional agricultural policy, clearly supports the development of organic farming (table 2). In the declaration of regional policy of 2004, it was established as a target for organic farming to reach 10% of the Wallonian agricultural area in 2010. To meet this challenge, an important financial support is granted to the farmers. As a total, 7.85 million euros were spent in 2009 (10,000 euros per farm as a mean), according to the criteria defined in table 2.

Table no. 2

Financial support for organic farming (€/ha)

	Conversion	Maintenance
Meadows, forage crops and fallow	425 (from 0 to 32 ha)	275 (from 0 to 32 ha)
	300 (from 32 to 64 ha)	150 (from 32 to 64 ha)
	225 (above 64 ha)	75 (above 64 ha)
Other crops	500 (from 0 to 32 ha)	350 (from 0 to 32 ha)
	375 (from 32 to 64 ha)	225 (from 32 to 64 ha)
	300 (above 64 ha)	150 (above 64 ha)
Orchards and horticulture	900 (from 0 to 14 ha)	750 (from 0 to 14 ha)
	600 (above 14 ha)	450 (above 14 ha)

Source : Région wallonne (2010).

The target of 10% is not reached, but it is clear that the recent development of organic farming in Wallonia is mainly due to the financial support decided by the regional government. Under the

Rural Development Programme, financial support for farmers is also granted for specific investments in organic farming. Public authorities (mainly the regional government), also support research and extension activities, through public institutions (the Walloon Center for Agricultural Research, universities etc) and associations (Nature and Progress, the Walloon Agricultural Federation, the Federation of Young Farmers, the National Union of Organic Farmers, the Committee for Organic Trials etc). Education and information of the public are also ensured by public and private actors. All the stakeholders of the organic sector in Wallonia are represented in "Bioforum Wallonie", which is officially recognized by the regional government as a partner for the definition of the policy regarding this sector. Bioforum Wallonie is also involved in the definition and implementation of advertising programmes for organic products, under the authority of the Wallonian Agency for the Promotion of a High Quality Agriculture.

10. Conclusions and perspectives

Organic farming registered a remarkable development in Wallonia during the last years, reaching 5% of the number of farms and of the agricultural area.

This evolution is due to the increase of demand, but also to the support of the public authorities, mainly the regional government.

Presently, the domestic production is not sufficient to satisfy the demand. So, a further development of the organic sector in Wallonia can be expected. However, the increase of the demand is limited by the prices of organic products, which are 70% higher than ordinary products.

It is also clear that the financial support of public authorities, through direct payments or services like research, extension, advertisement, is essential for the maintenance or development of the Wallonian organic sector. This support is not granted for the future, but can be expected.

International competition is also important, as organic products are not linked to a given territory and other countries can be in a better position than Wallonia.

So, finally, a small further development of the Wallonian organic agriculture can still be registered, and the target to reach 10% of the agricultural area can be expected.

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